

Tale Feathers

May 2005

Volume 72

Number 4

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May Joint Program with the Sierra Club

Mark your calendar for Thursday, May 26 at 7:30 p.m. at Litzinger School.

Rochelle Renken, biologist with the Missouri Department of Conservation, will discuss the current status and conservation strategies for the federally-endangered Interior Least Tern in Missouri. The Interior least tern is a bird that forages over large rivers and nests on open expanses of sand or gravel on islands in the river. Channelization, irrigation, and the construction of dams, levees, reservoirs, and dikes have eliminated most of the sandbars suitable for tern nesting. Further, poorly timed water discharge from dams have flooded terns' nests and nesting sites or allowed woody vegetation to encroach on the few remaining sandbars. In Missouri, Interior least terns used to nest along the Missouri River and southern half of the Mississippi River, especially near the confluence. Presently, they are found on less than 20 small islands along a 210-mile stretch of the Mississippi from Cape Girardeau to the Missouri-Arkansas-Tennessee border.

With the current least tern population in Missouri perhaps as low as 500 nesting pairs, conservation efforts are critical. Dr. Renken and others with MDC have been working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the conservation departments of neighboring states and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to identify and implement an effective survival plan for the least tern.

Dr. Renken received her PhD from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1988 with a focus on wildlife ecology and the ecology and conservation of birds. Her time with MDC has involved assessing the natural and human-caused factors that influence the abundance, distribution and ecology of non-game and endangered species in Missouri.

This program continues a successful tradition of partnership between St. Louis Audubon and the Eastern Missouri Group of the Sierra Club. That means you will have twice the people to meet and twice the opportunities to discover. The meeting is open to all, members or not.

Litzinger School is on the east side of Lindbergh, 1 mile south of Hwy 40. Questions, call Mitch Leachman at 314-739-5112.

St. Louis Audubon Society

**In Memory of Dr.
William S. Brandhorst**

Bethesda Orchard Residents'
Association

Charles and Marty Howard
Charles and Roz Lowenhaupt
Dr. and Mrs. Donald R. Oliver
William and Inga Pickering
Katherine and Manuel Ponte
Pete and Donna Rothschild
Dave and Karen Tylka
Jim and Margot Holsen

**In memory of
Jeanette Bott**

Jeanette L. Glad

President's Report

Torrey Berger

No one seems to know why SLAS's new year begins in May and not January. I like to think that it is because it puts us in sync with Mother Nature's calendar. In any event, it is both an honor and a pleasure to be writing to you as the new president of SLAS.

As my first official act, I would like to thank and congratulate Dave Tylka and all of the officers and committee chairmen for outstanding results this past year. Just a few examples: Sharon Nickl and the Education Committee made presentations to over 1,850 children and 440 adults; Linda Tossing and the Conservation Committee filed numerous comments and position statements on a host of proposed legislation and regulations; Mitch Leachman presented a full schedule of interesting programs, culminating in the outstanding presentation by Kenn Kaufman at the Annual Banquet; and John Solodar and the Field Trip Committee experienced ever increasing attendance, as evidenced by the 49 people who participated in our annual Owl and Woodcock Prowl at Busch Wildlife. These and many many others have made my biggest job for next year just to keep it up.

Throughout this coming year it is my intention to highlight in each President's Report one of our committees functions and opportunities for involvement, and to extend to all members an invitation to join us in these efforts. If you are interested in participating, or if you have any questions or suggestions concerning SLAS, please feel free to call me at any time at 314-579-9227.



Sandhill Cranes ...or Bust!

Mike Thelen

One of my 2005 birding-trip goals was to see the ancient Sandhill Crane migration at the Sandhill Crane spring staging area along the Platte River in Nebraska. Over the long weekend of March 17 through 20 my wife and I combined a family visit to Omaha with my Sandhill Crane adventure.

The Audubon Rowe Center and Sanctuary, near Gibbon, Nebraska, hosts Sandhill

Crane viewing in March and April and it's special because volunteer guides from around the country take sandhill watchers to a series of blinds on the banks of the Platte River to see roosting birds. I made my reservations the first day they were accepted: January 3.

From Omaha, March 18, I started the drive toward Gibbon going via the Harvard Marsh Wildlife Production Area in Clay County, Nebraska. I was thrilled to see my first sandhills of the trip, but amazed when I counted 1,000. Leaving Harvard Marsh I zigzagged through the countryside northward and picked up I-80. I had to stop on the shoulder 10 miles east of Grand Island (milepost 321) after spotting huge flocks of sandhills heading north. I could only guesstimate the size of this group at 5,000. As I continued west I saw another 1,000 in a field near the Crane Meadows Nature Center, west of Grand Island; another 1,000 in a field at milepost 303; 500 at milepost 296; 500 at milepost 285; another 500 west of milepost 285; and 1,000 east of Kearney at milepost 273. For the one day, March 18, I estimate that I saw over 10,000 Sandhill Cranes, and this was even before my Platte River blind visit, scheduled for early March 19. At one shoulder stop I watched a pair of sandhills jumping and bowing for one another in a timeless courtship display. Sandhills were in the air and in the fields; they seemed to be everywhere.

I arrived at the Rowe Center well before sunrise March 19. My group's two leaders led us away at 05:00 to our final parking place that we approached with headlights off. We walked quietly in the dark in the direction of the river, following a series of dim red lights marking the trail. Even at a quarter mile I could clearly hear the sandhills, noisy in their riverine roost yet safe from predators.

There were up to 2,000 sandhills in the river outside our blind, a two-story wooden structure, and even in the morning twilight I saw the silhouettes of the big birds, some walking stiffly in the cold water. Their distinctive vocalizations are a kind of throaty, croaking trill. Immature birds instead whistle plaintively and one might mistake the sound for shorebirds. Other sandhill watchers were seeing similar sights and hearing similar sounds from their blinds elsewhere along the river. As the light came up I spotted a female Northern Harrier and an adult "Western" rufous morph Red-tailed Hawk for my blind-mates, and heard Ring-necked Pheasant. Green-winged Teal floated by, unconcerned with us or the sandhills.

A few minutes after sunrise the birds outside our blind lifted off together to disperse for their daily foraging, and they joined thousands of others rising from other points in a spectacular display of sight and sound. I asked our leader, "how do you begin to count them?" He answered twice: "you don't," then, "count all the legs and divide by two." The massive flock looked like the biggest flocks of Snow Goose I've seen, or of blackbirds in winter. I heard someone say the number 20,000.

Our leader told us that, in fact, biologists have been successful using thermal imaging for counting the sandhills; a relatively new technique that has produced good results. He also told me that the 1,000 sandhills at Harvard Marsh on the 18th were unusual, and he thought that the strong northerly winds of the day had forced the birds down. The temperature had been about 35 F, with a north wind around 20 MPH. I had seen one sandhill in flight, flapping steadily against the stiff headwind, and even though the bird had airspeed, it's groundspeed, for a moment, was zero.

The Platte River has been under significant human pressure, notably from the irrigation demands of agriculture. That and the effects of a five-year drought have reduced water levels dramatically. There is concern about what this means for the sandhills, for the Platte River staging area is critical to the sandhill spring migration scheme. The birds stop here for food and rest, building strength for the final push to their breeding territories in the north country: the northern contiguous states, Canada, Alaska, and even Siberia.

There is encouraging news of a program designed to support the goal of restoring water and habitat in the Platte and Republican River basins. The state of Nebraska and the federal government are partnering in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. CREP will pay farmers about \$125 an acre to keep irrigated fields out of production.

The Audubon Center at the Rowe Sanctuary has been nicely done. It was fun to visit and the staff was friendly and hospitable. I bought two copies of Michael Forsberg's "On Ancient Wings, The Sandhill Cranes of North America." The author was there and kindly signed both books for me. Outside the Center there were Bald Eagles on the river and Harris's Sparrows at the feeders. The four-tubed thistle feeder near the building drew a dense, concentrated group of 50 American Goldfinch.

Driving back to Omaha I saw several hundred Snow Goose flying south (!) over I-80, and pulled over once again.

I'm fortunate to have seen Sandhill Cranes in several of the United States, and heartily recommend a Nebraska Sandhill Crane trip. Read more about the Rowe Center and Sanctuary at www.rowesanctuary.org.

Dr. Bill Brandhorst Dies

Dave Tylka

Longtime St. Louis Audubon Society member and board member, Bill Brandhorst, died on March 15, 2005, at 87. Bill was awarded the Robert J.

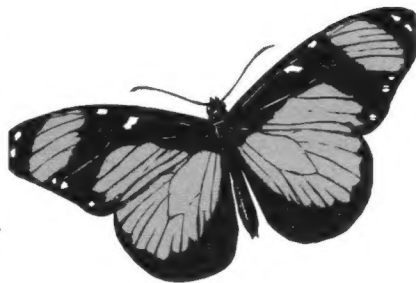
Terry Lifetime Achievement Award

in 2000 for his outstanding dedication, commitment and leadership in service to our Audubon Society and the natural resource community. He is only one of nine members who have earned this Award, the highest honor conferred by our Society.

Besides teaching at Washington University School of Dental Medicine, Bill was a devoted naturalist and loved to share his love of nature with all. A skilled woodworker, he developed a wooden glass frame to encase butterflies and moths so both wing surfaces could be seen. To encourage others to appreciate nature, he gave hundreds of these butterfly cases to many nature centers around our community, as well as educators and volunteers within St. Louis Audubon. He was also instrumental in having dozens of educational taxidermy bird mounts done by the Schwarz Studio. These butterfly and bird educational mounts are used by our St. Louis Audubon Education Committee every week in classroom presentations and interpretive events across the St. Louis area.

A tribute was made to Bill at our recent Annual Dinner. With every mount that Bill gave away, he included a small printed brochure with his words-"It is given to you because something so beautiful should be near a person who appreciates it and who is warmed and stimulated by its presence ... and will listen for the call to help preserve it for future generations." Bill, your spirit will indeed be flying with us in the future.

Memorial contributions to Bill Brandhorst may be made to the St. Louis Audubon Society. Please mail these to David Rogles, 60 Shadowridge Drive, St. Peters, MO 63376.



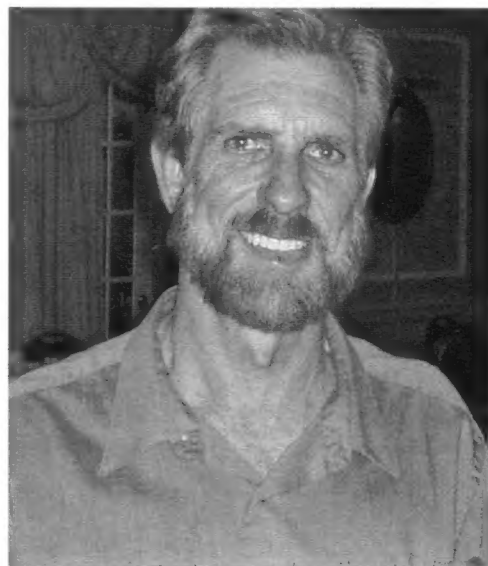
Annual Dinner Tough Act to Follow

We wanted to do something different and bigger. We wanted to "make a big deal" out of our annual awards program. By all accounts, we were successful. Nearly 150 people attended our evening at the Cheshire Inn Restaurant on Friday, April 8th! They participated in our first-ever silent auction, helped recognize five outstanding individuals, and experienced a thoughtful and entertaining presentation by birder, author and conservationist Kenn Kaufman.

The evening generated over \$1900 to help fund local chapter activities, over \$1800 from the silent auction and nearly \$120 from a book sale. Our honored guests included, Judy Tisdale as recipient of the St. Louis Audubon Education Award; Vicki Flier as Outstanding Audubon Volunteer; William Lacy Clay as Outstanding Natural Resource Legislator; and Ben Knox as recipient of the St. Louis Audubon Conservation Award. We also recognized Marcos Maldonado Coelho in absentia, UMSL PhD student, as recipient of our Graduate Student Scholarship. Finally, Kenn Kaufman topped the evening with a slide presentation and discussion of the wonders, enchantment and even humor of bird watching.

Many thanks go to Ron and Rhonda Coleman and the volunteers at the Open Space Council for coordinating our silent auction; all those who donated items for the auction as well as those that made purchases; Lynn Oris and others at Barnes & Noble for the last-minute orchestration of the book sale; Lynn Breakstone and Julie Leeman for organizing the awards and scholarship program; Pat and Jack Lueders and their staff for the wonderful meal and facility; Dave Tylka and all the others that helped organize and make the evening a success; and, finally many kudos to Kenn Kaufman for saying, "Yes," when asked to come to St. Louis and for using nearly all of his honorarium to provide free copies of his Spanish-language bird guide to schools in the Sonora-area of northern Mexico.

I am not sure if the evening could have been better! Many people expressed their joy and excitement throughout the evening. If you were unable to attend, perhaps next year you will be more fortunate. Speaking of which, we will start our initial planning over the summer and we welcome your suggestions. It will be a tough act to follow!



Speaker Kenn Kaufman

SLAS Birding Trips for May and June 2005

John Solodar.

It's time for the latter half of the big spring migration push. Between the St. Louis Audubon Society trips on Saturdays and the WGNSS Sunday trips that are also listed, you have many good opportunities to go birding during May and early June.

May 7, Saturday, SLAS - This trip to Tower Grove Park comes just one day before the historic peak of migration. Tower Grove has been one of the premier birding spots for many years. Pat Lueders and John Solodar will lead this trip starting at 7:30 AM from the Gaddy Bird Garden.

May 8, Sunday, WGNSS 8 AM Tower Grove Park, meet David Garcia and Bob Bailey at the Bird Garden, NW corner of the park.

May 14, Saturday, SLAS - Nick Barber and another leader (TBA) will lead this trip in Forest Park. This St. Louis city park is the other perennial good birding park in the city. We'll start at 7:30 AM at the Kennedy Forest Trailhead off Wells Drive.

May 15, Sunday, WGNSS - 8 AM Riverlands with Torrey Berger at the headquarters building.

May 21, Saturday, SLAS - We travel to the river confluence area this week to MDC's Columbia Bottom. This relatively new area is proving to be an excellent spring birding location. MDC's Mike Arduser will help John Solodar lead this trip which starts at 7:30 AM.

May 22, Sunday, WGNSS - Meet at the bird garden for a trip in Tower Grove Park led by Sherry McGowan.

May 28, Saturday, SLAS - Little Creve Coeur Lake/Marsh. The wet part of Little Creve Coeur is becoming so filled in that it is now more Marsh than Lake, but the birding here is still very good. This trip will start at 7:30 AM and will be led by Torrey Berger and Dave Rogles.

May 29, Sunday, WGNSS - Trip led by Tom Parmeter at Busch Conservation Area starts at 8 AM at Hampton Lake.

June 4, Saturday, SLAS - Lost Valley Trail has been excellent for spring warblers the first weekend in June for the last few years. It's one of the few places where we have had Kentucky, Cerulean and Worm-eating Warblers all on one trip. We'll also try to cover the Katy Trail Access area and perhaps parts of Busch Conservation Area or the Blue Grosbeak Trail. Pat Lueders and Mike Grant will lead this trip which starts at Lost Valley 7:30 AM.

How to get there

Busch Conservation Area - Take U.S.40/I-64 west into St. Charles County. Take Hwy 94 south from U.S 40 about 1 mile to Hwy D. Turn right and go about 1.5 miles to the entrance on the right. Turn left at the "T" to Hampton Lake and meet in the parking lot. For trips using a H.Q starting point turn right at the "T".

Columbia Bottom - Take Riverview Blvd north from the northern leg of I-270 (the last exit in Missouri before I-270 crosses into Illinois) and go 2.8 miles to Columbia Bottom entrance on the right. Go 1.7 miles and meet at the River Access Parking lot on the left.

Forest Park - Take Hampton Ave north from I-64 (Hwy 40 to locals) in St. Louis City. To access the Kennedy Forest Trailhead turn left onto Wells Drive at the first traffic light after Hampton crosses over I-64/Hwy 40. Follow Wells past the Zoo and look for the MDC trailhead signs on the right. Park in the inner area of the circle.

Little Creve Coeur Lake/Marsh - From the western leg of I-270 take Olive 2.0 miles west to Creve Coeur Mill Road (White Royal Banks building on right). Turn right (north) and drive 1.3 miles to the entrance to Seeger Golf Driving Range. This is a small dirt road that goes over the railroad tracks on the left. Drive past the clubhouse to the two red barns in the back.

Lost Valley Trail - From the intersection of Hwy 40 and Hwy 94 just over the Missouri River in St. Charles County, take Hwy 94 south (the signs say west but you are going south) 5.7 miles to the Lost Valley Trailhead on the right.

Riverlands - Take Hwy 367 north from I-270. The designation changes to Hwy 67 just beyond the 4th traffic light, but continue. Turn right on last road just before the Clark Bridge at the Mississippi River. (Fisca gas station at this turn.) Continue past the Fisca station a short way to the large Headquarters Building on the left.

Tower Grove Park (Gaddy Bird Garden)- I-44 or I-64 (Highway 40) to south Kingshighway. From I-64 go about 1 mile to left on Magnolia. Park on street; walk to the brushy area (Gaddy Bird Garden) at the northwest corner of the park.



Return to Kearney: 35th Rivers & Wildlife Celebration

Mary Dueren

I managed to convince a number of my fellow Audubon friends to go north in the middle of March to Nebraska, of all places. I explained that the Sandhill Cranes are spectacular. The weather promised to be cooperative for the trip. The weatherman has sometimes been wrong about conditions in Nebraska. The high plains weather changes from moment to moment. As long as it didn't snow, our little caravan would be just fine.

We were on the road early. Our weary band of six arrived around 4pm in Kearney. It was sunny and 66 degrees. We had spotted the Sand Hill cranes in the fields around Grand Island. Nothing like birding at 80 miles per hour! They were busy feeding on the waste corn in the vast farm fields. Everyone was anxious to get a closer look, so we headed to Fort Kearney State Park Recreation Area where a rails to trails bridge is easily accessible. A short hike took us the bridge over the Platte River. It wasn't long before the Sand Hills started arriving. A roost was setting up about 200 yards up river from the bridge. The calls of cranes reverberated all around us. Just as we started to leave, a very large group rose from the river, startled by something we couldn't see in the twilight. We watched as the cranes kettled in the afterglow and then settled down again. That was a great way to start off our weekend in Nebraska. The next day some of the group went birding by themselves; others took guided trips. The problem was the wind. Not just any ordinary wind. This was a constant steady blast of 25 to 30 miles per hour. This blast was out of the northwest. It was going to be a challenge to see anything because most birds just hunker down in those conditions. But we did see birds like the Harris sparrow, the Northern Shrike, Green winged Teal, Bald Eagles, Pelicans, Bufflehead, Turkey, and Ring-necked Pheasant. Many of us were privileged to see at least two or three prairie dog towns.

Another striking image for this part of the country was Harlan County Reservoir, an Army Corps of Engineers project. Normally, this dam and reservoir is used for flood control and recreation. Right now, it is 60% below capacity! Structures flooded by the dam are becoming visible again.

Recreation is non-existent. Docks are a long way from the water. The drought is in its sixth year and shows no sign of relief. The battle for water in the heart of the bread basket of the world will become desperate if the drought goes on for much longer. The threat to the Platte River is real.

The Rivers & Wildlife Celebration kicked off Friday night with a wonderful presentation by Michael Forsberg. His book: On

Ancient Wings was just released. The sale of his book will benefit Rowe Sanctuary.

Saturday morning started before the sun was even above the horizon.

We walked quietly into the blind. It was officially 21 degrees. Thankfully, the wind had calmed down, but standing next to the river is always colder. The sunrise was spectacular!! But the Sandhills stayed put in the river.

They preened; they danced; they chased each other; they walked from one side to the other, but they didn't move. As the sun rose higher, we realized there were thousands of cranes in Platte!!

Then suddenly, up river, the crane rise began. It looked like a wave coming towards the blind!! It was breathtaking!! The estimate was 40,000 to 50,000 cranes rose as one group.

The raucous noise moved all around us as this colony of cranes headed off to feed in corn fields. What a way to start off the day!!

We headed back to the conference. Some of us attended the interesting lectures and discussions ranging from the survival of the Platte River to Purple Martins. Outside warmed considerably, and off course we headed out to see more birds.

Saturday sundown was spent back at the bridge again.

Again, the cranes came down. It was later than the previous night. But all it took was a pair coming down. Then others kettled over the area, dropped their legs and wings and settle down. Eventually hundreds were landing. As we walked away in the dwindling light, other Sandhill Cranes could be heard coming into their ancient nightly roost. We started our day and ended our day with the Sandhill Cranes.

The banquet's featured speaker was Julie Zickfoose, noted author and illustrator for Bird Watcher's Digest

and guest commentator on NPR Radio's, All Things Considered. She spoke of her experience in the blind that morning and of raising hummingbirds.

It was an early start, but our merry band headed out on Interstate 80 for the 10 hour trek home. The cranes were already in the fields. We saw the last of them flying around Gittner, Nebraska, some 20 or 30 miles east of Grand Island. Soon, the cranes will be headed to their Arctic nesting territories, a further trip for them. I can't wait until the next spring when the urge to spend a March weekend in the heart of Nebraska comes. I will get some will travelers to head north.

Thank-you for going along: Mitch Leachman, Anne Bolte, Pat Leuders, Linda Tossing, Johanna Shipley, Sue Gustafson, David Rabeneau, Mike Thelen.

For more information about the Sandhill Cranes or Rowe Sanctuary, visit www.rowesanctuary.org or www.kearneycoc.org.



America's Birdiest County

For the past few years, the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has held an annual countrywide count allowing local birders to know just exactly which birds are out there within the confines of their borders. This year, the Wild Bird Center is excited to organize a count for St. Louis County. We'll be calling all birders to help us prove that we are indeed America's Birdiest County!

But it isn't just a bird count - it's also a fund-raiser for a very worthy bird related organizations. Participants in the count are asked to collect pledges from friends, family and co-workers based on how many varieties of birds are spotted. The money collected will be distributed among the following groups: Wild Bird Rehab, the St. Louis Audubon Society, the American Bird Conservancy and Cornell Lab's Backyard Feeder Count. If you have a favorite amongst this group, you may designate that your collected pledges be directed to that organization.

The count will be held over the weekend of May 20 - 22. Each participant will be limited to a 24-hour period of counting. We want to be certain that ALL of St. Louis County is covered, so we're asking participants to commit to certain regions in the county. The map will be available for viewing and selecting your territory at the store beginning on May 4th, along with detailed rules for the count.

We're requesting a minimum pledge of \$10 to participate. Come in early on the 4th to claim your favorite birding spot and get details on the countdown event we'll be holding at the store!

Wild Bird Center Creve Coeur 314-439-9453, and the South County Wild Bird Center at 314-842-1496 is also participating.

What a beautiful day it was to be outside!

Josh Uffman

Not sure if it was record was set, but 49 people joined the SLAS Owl and Woodcock Prowl to Busch CA in St. Charles County this evening!! The trip was led by Torrey Berger and I starting at 4:30PM. 29 total species were observed and I am pretty sure everyone in the group observed all the highlights of the day:

Fallen Oak Nature Trail:

1-Red Breasted Nuthatch....took a while but eventually everyone saw it!

1-Yellow Bellied Sapsucker

Along Road B, we were all able to observe 1-Red Shouldered Hawk sitting on a nest....This was from a very safe distance for the birds involved.

At the most eastern end of Lake 36, a short grassy field. 4-5 American Woodcocks were heard. At least 1 bird was observed very well by all as it continued to return to the exact same location. This was about 50 yards away from us, each time it displayed... And thanks to Mike Thelen's enormous flashlight we all had good looks!

Also, many Eastern Towhee's heard singing.

Lastly, I did my best owl calls for the group tonight after watching the A. woodcocks, but we did not get a single owl to respond...maybe next year.

Tale Feathers

Tale Feathers is published monthly by the St. Louis Audubon Society. Messenger Printing prints 2,500 copies of each newsletter on recycled paper using soy ink. Anne Bolte edits the newsletter.

St. Louis Audubon Society 2004 - 2005

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Attention!

The deadline for the August issue is **July 10**. Send inquiries to Anne by E-mail ambolte@charter.net

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